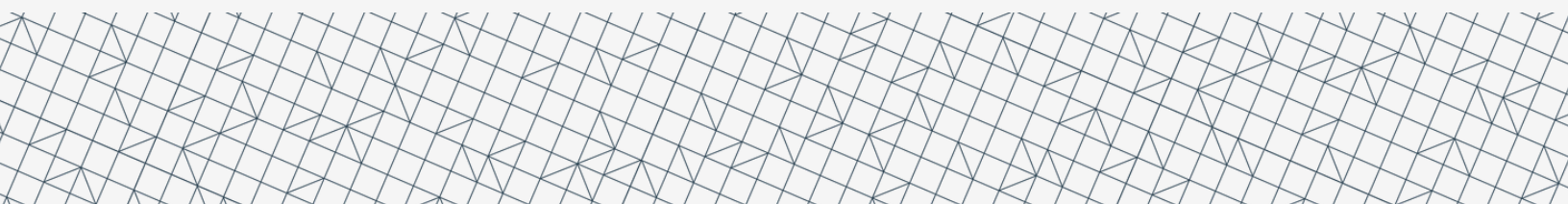


# Belonging, Community and Climate Action



# Belonging, Community and Climate Action

At a time of increasing social isolation and accelerating climate change, belonging has never been more vital. By promoting a sense of community and belonging, we can spur climate action. At the same time, climate action is a means to building and strengthening belonging. This compilation of short pieces by contributing authors from across Turtle Island explores the layers of interconnection between these areas, both in practical and theoretical terms.

Tamarack Institute’s Community Climate Transitions and Communities Building Belonging networks co-initiated this publication and invited changemakers from diverse sectors and disciplines to share their perspectives on the topic. With deep gratitude to Jodi Lammiman, Njoki Mbūrū, Prachir Pasricha, and Tara Day, who contributed their wisdom and ideas.

Prepared and edited by Laura Schnurr.

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## You Protect What You Know and Love

Prachir Pasricha



In 2020, amid the climate crisis, political polarization, and social isolation, Neal Gorenflo was called to do something seemingly simple, yet deeply radical in today's world: live one year as locally as possible. From food to finances, Neal sought to change every aspect of his life to be able to (re)connect with the people he called his neighbours, and the place he called home. He came out of his [experiment](#) with a few key takeaways, one of which rings true for both taking climate action and building belonging in communities: "You protect what you know and love." As Neal writes,

I learned many things about my neighbors and town this year .... No surprise, getting to know my hometown led me to become more fond of it. That's not an unimportant detail as environmentalists have long known that people only protect what they know and love.

This impact of [connecting with the natural world on pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours](#) is a powerful antidote to what many of us tend to do in the face of an issue as big as the climate crisis: focus on what we think we don't have. Enough time, enough money, enough power to enact systemic change. But the reality is that [Canadian municipalities directly or indirectly contribute](#)

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**How can we activate our public spaces to offer both adaptation and mitigation benefits?**

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[to around 50% of the country's GHG emissions](#). That's why it's important for us to take an asset-based, community-led approach to climate action and ask: Whether it's repairing, gardening, or biking, what gifts do residents have to offer to a more sustainable future? How can we activate our public spaces to offer both adaptation and mitigation benefits? What renewable resources are abundant in our communities that can be harnessed to provide clean energy?

In my community, Mississauga, neighbours are coming together in all kinds of ways to both connect with each other and advance a climate transition. In the city's Cooksville neighbourhood, residents are growing fruits and vegetables in a [local community garden](#). [Mississauga Cycles](#) connects residents eager to share their cycling knowledge with newcomers hoping to get to know their community by bike. And any resident can apply to be a Fixer at Sheridan College's [Repair Café](#), where anyone can bring in household items to have them fixed and learn how to fix them themselves. These are just a few examples of how asset-based community development is deepening a sense of belonging to both a place and its peoples, creating more sustainable and connected communities.

As the climate crisis evolves, we need each other more than ever to be able to withstand times of distress and disaster. Through strengthening our relationship with nature alongside our neighbours, we become committed to protecting the place and people we know and love for generations to come.

*Prachir is a Manager of Communities on Tamarack's Communities Building Belonging and Community Climate Transitions teams. Prachir works with Tamarack's members to foster social connectedness and advance climate action in their local contexts.*

## Belonging Is Praxis: On Responsibility, Accountability, and Possibility

Njoki Mbũrũ



Belonging is a verb. It is a continuation, iteration, and collaboration. Belonging requires relationship—the kind of relationship that offers itself up to be held accountable, to be counselled, to be questioned, to be undefined [un-rigid], and also, to evolve.

In my rather visual way of navigating life, I perceive belonging as an image of a series of hands which are simultaneously holding onto a single strand of very long thread. The magic of this image is that, with each new hand that joins, the thread generously grows in length to accommodate this new life. At the same time, when someone releases their part of the thread due to transitioning out of this life, being unable to sustain the strength to hold onto the thread due to exhaustion [brought about by capitalism, incarceration, chronic illness], or perhaps even relocating to an entirely different community etc., their bit of the thread remains, but now hangs just a little bit looser. Faintly, it is as though the thread is whispering, **“Your place here will not be forgotten.”**

This thread, the connecting fibre that runs between our hands, is both a bridge and a web. Down the line, if someone chose to tug at the thread, there is inevitably some form of tension that travels throughout the collective. In this sense, belonging, as I understand it, **is what happens when there is harmony between the acts of releasing, resting, and tightening.**

This dance between **releasing** the strength of your grip when you need to, **resting** fully from holding onto the thread, and **engaging actively** in tightening the thread is how belonging feels to me. Belonging, therefore, is a practice of *consent, collaboration, clear communication, taking accountability, delegating*



*responsibility, decentralized leadership/ownership, and generous welcoming* into an **evolving** collective, where I am aware that **my choices have ripples** for those connected to me.

One of the fallacies of our current socio-cultural-political condition(ing) is that: Belonging is a one-time, static, and immutable marker of identity. This is a hierarchy-driven and paternalistic definition of belonging which produces an image of belonging as a ‘stamp of approval’; a nod from the ‘decision makers’ that your place here—wherever here is—is secured and affirmed, by any and all means necessary.

*Something about this definition and perception of belonging feels rigid, colonial, and violently fragile. The kind of fragility whose shattering glass will inevitably graze and cut through us without apology.*

With these contemplations in mind, I find myself asking these three pertinent questions:

- To whom and to what do I belong?
- What must I *willingly* be ignoring, denying, appropriating, believing, and/or replicating for me to claim that I ‘belong’?
- How do the qualities of my ‘belonging’ impede, oppose, undermine, collaborate with, and/or uplift the sense of belonging of my fellow community member(s)?

Shifting gears to contemplate on belonging in the context of climate action, what comes up for me is: The ideas/solutions that we propose in an effort to facilitate climate action are only as good as the depth of relationship-building, reflective listening, and self-awareness that we individually and collectively practice. Trust is the currency in the work of meaningful climate action—trusting ourselves as creators of a more sustainable future and also trusting one another as witnesses and good stewards of the integrity and purpose of our collective, coordinated movement/action.

I could keep writing, theorizing, and conversing this nebulous, emergent, and critical topic through long threads of time and space. For now, I will leave you with this: **Belonging is a site of struggle, power, and liberation—all at once.** While fluid and fleeting in form, it is also a felt sense. There is a quality to it that is tactile and tangible. It is that feeling that moves through you when you are greeted with kindness at the barber shop, when someone takes a second longer to learn how to pronounce your name, when the folks across the street stick a poster on their window that says “You belong here”, when your grandma calls from across the ocean to remind you that she prays for you, and when you can show up in the incompleteness and, yet, simultaneous wholeness of all you are.

*Njoki Mbūrū is a storyteller and poet of African descent who is incessantly curious about the intersections of power, money, web3, and public policy. At this time, she is guided by the question “What else is possible?”*



**Belonging, therefore, is a practice of consent, collaboration, clear communication ... where I am aware that my choices have ripples for those connected to me.**



## Building from Belonging – A Whole-of-Community Approach to Climate Action

Tara Day



### Getting All Hands On Deck for Climate

Like many others, I've been thinking a lot lately about how to get more people engaged in climate action.

Tackling the climate crisis is described as an all-hands-on-deck situation, where we all need to be working together to meet the moment and prepare for future challenges. A problem seems to be, though, that many people don't see where they fit into that or how they could make a meaningful difference. With climate change so big and complex, many people are feeling it's simply too big for them – so they're staying on the sidelines when they are so needed on the pitch.

What needs to shift, so that all kinds of people across all kinds of communities feel that climate response involves, needs, and welcomes them? How can everyone be supported in finding their role in the action, so that all hands are on deck?

I believe there are at least two parts to the answer. One is helping people discover that their unique skills and talents are valuable in the work – and that there is something tangible to do, relating closely to their own lives, where their skills can be brought to bear.

And another is helping connect and strengthen local communities to bolster people's sense of belonging and togetherness – the sense of acting as a 'we', motivated by care for one another and the places we call home.

## Building Community Strength & Belonging with ABCD

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is an approach to community building that has real potential to help with all of this.

In ABCD, communities come together to take stock of their strengths – rather than their deficits – and to draw fresh ideas and momentum from the diverse membership of the community.

Picture getting to know your neighbours better, and coming together to start an inventory of all the strengths and assets you have as a community – the diverse skills, passions, and experience of community members, as well as the assets of the place you collectively call home. Then picture putting your heads together to envision how to build from those strengths to make your community healthier, safer, more inclusive, and more climate-resilient – where all community members are connected and play a role. Picture yourselves planning a community garden or backyard-sharing program to increase food sovereignty and physical activity. Picture able-bodied community members learning from vulnerable community members about how to help in a severe weather event, and then putting the plans in place.

That's a connected community, where the diverse strengths and assets of community members feed into climate action, quality of life, agency, a shared sense of ownership, and a deep sense of belonging.

It's a self-reinforcing loop where building belonging can propel action, and taking action together builds belonging.

An ABCD approach to climate resilience could look like this.

### Turning to One Another & Exploring Possibilities

As Meg Wheatley wrote in her poem [Turning to One Another](#):

“There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about. Ask ‘What’s possible?’ not ‘What’s wrong?’ Keep asking ....

Know that creative solutions come from new connections.”

This can be game-changing in each of our communities, wherever we live.

*Tara Day is a learning design professional, urban homesteader, and climate organizer who is passionate about community resilience, active citizenship, capacity building, food sovereignty, social inclusion, and leaving no one behind. Tara led the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) team in Tamarack's 2023 Community Climate Cohort sits on Tamarack's Community Climate Transitions Advisory Group.*



## The Power of Belonging and Uplifting Our Unique Gifts in Driving Climate Action

Jodi Lammiman



The night is singing. I hear the call of a whippoorwill. Frogs croak and belch a minor harmony. Fireflies light the night. Crickets chirp in tandem. It is dark but the whole world feels awake. I am 10, then 13, then 26. During spring and summer nights at my family's rural home, I walk out to the end of our driveway and enter the night community. I don't feel like I belong at school, church or even within my family unit, but this road, at night, is a place where that all falls away. It's a place to which I belong.

This sense of belonging planted the initial seeds of love and care for the world that eventually grew into a vocation of community development and climate action. As community conveners, our work is to invite others into deeper relationships with themselves, the ecosystems around them, and their communities. We start with belonging because this is the root of healthy communities and systems change. Belonging flows from proximity, intentional

relationship, and repeated practices that build trust and connection. But it's not easy. Most of us can recall experiences of feeling othered, isolated, and alone. When I facilitate retreats on the topic of climate change, most groups start with anxiety. This is why we always spend time welcoming our bodies, life experiences, and each other. We welcome our climate grief and whatever other emotions are present. We talk through how we want to be together, recognizing we each have unique gifts to contribute to this space.

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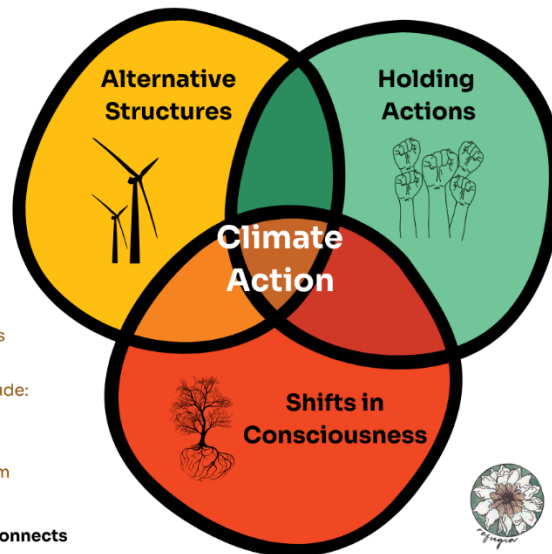
Everyone belongs in this movement. Joanna Macy, Teacher of [The Work that Reconnects](#), says, “If the world is to be healed through human efforts, I am convinced it will be by ordinary people, people whose love for this life is even greater than their fear.” The Work that Reconnects acknowledges that climate action is not the sole realm of any one dimension of activism, it’s all dimensions working in tandem, with different individuals each contributing different assets and strengths to the collective work.

## DIMENSIONS OF CLIMATE ACTION

**Each dimension of climate action is important in the shift towards a world that addresses climate change.**

Analyzing systemic causes and creating **Alternative Structures** is necessary in the creation of a sustainable future. Examples include: conversion to renewable energy sources, co-housing, local currencies, transitioning away from fossil fuels.

Adapted from *The Work that Reconnects*



**Holding Actions** attempt to slow the damage being done to earth. Examples include: political, legislative, and legal work required to reduce climate change, as well as direct actions—blockades, boycotts, civil disobedience, etc.

**Shifts In Consciousness** refer to shifts in individual & collective deep-seated philosophies, spiritualities and perceptions of reality that allow alternative structures to take root and be built. Examples include: Living Systems Theory, Eco-Psychology, Deep Ecology, Indigenous ways of knowing, Buddhism, shifting from exploitation towards perceptions that acknowledge the interdependence of all things.

Source: Jodi Lammiman, *Refugia Retreats*

It is late evening in October. I’m facilitating a climate grief retreat with a mix of climate activists, front line workers, and folks who care deeply about the world. Each is grieving a planet in crisis. After introductions, agreements and sharing what draws each of us to this retreat, I invite the participants outdoors into a small clearing near the retreat centre. The night is cool and dark. Surrounded by spruce and pine, we look up at the clear sky. The stars are here, trees and small creatures, prairie grasses. We all share in this moment. We welcome our bodies, our life experiences, our anxieties, and ourselves into this community for this weekend. We end our time outside noting the emotional responses that can arise when we are outside alone at night. We compare this to how different it feels to share in this moment as a community. From this sense of belonging, we begin the work of our climate retreat together.

*Jodi Lammiman is the founder of Refugia Retreats, which exists at the intersections of social and environmental justice, creating community spaces for individuals and communities to address and process climate emotions while fostering connection, belonging, and resilience.*

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The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada or the Definity Insurance Foundation.